



# defining our terms

## Professional Development in Out-of-School Time

by Nancy Peter

Research in the out-of-school time (OST) field confirms a strong connection between professional development for staff and positive experiences and outcomes for youth (National Youth Development Learning Network [NYDLN], 2006). According to Heather Weiss (2005/2006), founder and director of the Harvard Family Research Project, "Professional development for those who work with children and youth is fraught with challenges and ripe with opportunity—specifically, the opportunity to increase staff quality, which experts agree is critical to positive experiences for children and youth" (p. 1). In recent years, the OST community has invested significant time and money into researching, creating, implementing, and evaluating professional development activities for OST staff.

These efforts, while important, have been hampered by irregular wording and inconsistent definitions. Staff use multiple terms to describe or provide a context for different forms of professional development. For example, many agencies use the terms *professional development* and *workshops* to mean the same thing, while others believe that workshops are one component of a larger professional development strategy. Some organizations distinguish *professional development*, which enriches the individual, from *staff development*, which enriches the program or agency; others use these terms interchangeably. Unfortunately,

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because there is no standard OST professional development glossary, we have no common reference point through which to synchronize our terminology.

### Why Definitions Matter

Why is it problematic that one organization's *training series* is another's *professional development strategy*? What is the harm in using the terms *capacity building* and *quality improvement* interchangeably? In a relatively new field such as OST, shouldn't we expect a great deal of variation in our definitions and terminology?

It is precisely because OST is a rapidly evolving field that we should pay closer attention to our terms and communication. OST draws from multiple disciplines including classroom education, social work, daycare, and recreation, each with its own nomenclature. To communicate effectively among ourselves, we need to know that various professional development terms mean the same thing to various individuals or organizations. For example, my organization, the Out-of-School Time Resource Center (OSTRC), was recently asked to evaluate a *technical assistance* strategy. Since our expertise is in evaluating workshops and conferences, we developed new instruments to monitor what we assumed would be less formal, more individualized interventions—only to learn that the “technical assistance” we would be evaluating consisted of a series of trainings.

Similarly, the OST field is working hard to establish our legitimacy with funders, legislatures, and the public (Afterschool Alliance, 2005). Being consistent in our terminology and message strengthens our collective credibility. I have been in meetings with grant makers and government staff who expressed confusion—and frustration—over the variety of overlapping terms emanating from our field. Anything we can do to lessen the interpretive burden on others, particularly stakeholders, benefits everyone.

One immediate way to promote effective communication is to preface all OST professional development conversations by introducing and defining our terms. For example, when conducting OST workshops, the OSTRC introduces a working definition of *professional development* so that all participants are speaking the same language. We have also found this strategy helpful in other OST situations: brainstorming about the term *intermedi-*

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at the beginning of a seminar on intermediaries, discussing multiple interpretations of *safety* when developing a vision statement that addresses community safety, and more. Since professional development terms and interpretations are inherently diverse, introductory definitions should include contextual disclaimers such as “For the purpose of this workshop...” or “According to our organization....”

A second, more substantive and challenging approach would be to agree on a set of common professional development terms and definitions. This will not be easy, as the field struggles with muddled terminology in many settings. For example, national surveys document extreme diversity in job titles that share similar job responsibilities, even within the same city (Buher-Kane & Peter, 2008; LeMenestrel & Dennehy, 2003). In one Philadelphia setting, a *youth worker* is an adult who works with youth; in another, it is a young person who works. Such

diversity hinders efforts to establish credentials and career ladders in our emerging field. We have to continually remind ourselves of where we are and with whom we are conversing.

Yet the OST field is making linguistic progress. We have developed many sanctioned sets of national program standards (Breslin, 2003), have identified multiple youth worker competencies (NYDNL, 2003), and are working on a series of afterschool trainer guidelines (National Afterschool Association, 2008).

To jumpstart a conversation about OST professional development terminology, the following section presents a set of commonly used terms. For each, I begin by gathering definitions from other fields and then provide examples of how the OST community has adapted and refined these terms. Finally, I propose a series of OST professional development definitions. These are my own definitions, based on research in multiple fields; I intend them to serve as conversation starters, not proclamations.

### Professional Development Definitions

With the exception of the first phrase, *professional development*, I present all definitions below in alphabetical order, not in order of importance. The terms I have chosen are derived from but do not represent a complete spectrum of professional development formats, programs, and opportunities. I have included the terms

capacity building and quality improvement, even though they do not relate exclusively to professional development, because they are often used in describing professional development strategies.

### **Professional Development**

**Definitions from related fields.** *Professional development* is defined differently in different fields. In the business world, professional development is designed to help organizations enhance workforce effectiveness and productivity (Broad & Newstrom, 1992). The National Staff Development Council defines *professional development* for classroom teachers as “a comprehensive, substantiated and intensive approach to improving teachers’ and principals’ effectiveness in raising student achievement” (Mizell, 2008). According to the U.S. Department of Education (1998), teacher professional development should respect the leadership capacity of teachers, emphasize individual and organizational improvement, integrate current research in teaching and learning, provide content and strategies, promote continuous inquiry, and be evaluated on the basis of teacher and student impact. Across fields, professional development activities can include workshops, conferences, study groups, professional networks, task forces, and peer coaching (Porter, Garet, Desimone, & Birman, 2003) as well as program observations, journaling, curriculum development, and higher education (NSDC, 2004).

**OST context.** Weiss (2005/2006) defines *professional development* as “a full range of activities that have the common goal of increasing the knowledge and skills of staff members and volunteers” (p. 1). Boston’s BEST Initiative, which offers youth development trainings and institutes, adds that “professional development refers to tools and activities that improve professional performance and the efficiency of a project, program, organization, or institution” (Youth Work Central, 1999). Professional development formats and settings include higher education activities; pre-service and in-service training; seminars and resource centers; credentialing systems and programs; local and national conferences; mentoring and coaching relationships; and informal resources such as newsletters, online discussion boards, and “brown bag” lunches (Bouffard & Little, 2004). Overall, OST professional development strives to enhance the individual, the program, and the field simultaneously.

**Proposed definition.** *Professional development* refers to a spectrum of activities, resources, and supports that

help practitioners work more effectively with or on behalf of children and youth. Professional development formats include workshops, conferences, technical assistance, apprenticeships, peer mentoring, professional memberships, college coursework, and additional diverse offerings. Practitioners can be full-time staff, part-time staff, volunteers, teenagers, parents, or other non-staff members, provided that the professional development experience culminates in supporting OST youth participants. Because youth impact is always the ultimate goal, *staff development* is indistinguishable from *professional development*.

### **Capacity Building**

**Definitions from related fields.** In her book *Investing in Capacity Building*, Blumenthal (2003) broadly defines *capacity building* as actions that improve nonprofit effectiveness. Capacity building in nonprofit agencies is comparable to organizational development, organizational effectiveness, and organizational performance management in for-profit organizations (McNamara, 1997). Capacity-building strategies involve human resource development, such as staff training, as well as organizational, structural, and administrative enhancement (Global Development Research Center, 1992).

**OST context.** *Capacity building* of programs and networks often refers to increasing both their depth, or quality, and their breadth in terms of number of sites, participants, contact hours, and activities. Specific capacity-building outcomes include increased numbers of high-impact programs, qualified staff, sound administrative processes, and sustainability strategies (American Youth Policy Forum, 2008). High-level organizational activities associated with achieving these outcomes are articulating a core vision, assigning coordination to a non-government entity, creating an advisory body of influential members, identifying dedicated funding for infrastructure development, adhering loosely rather than rigidly to the initial plan, and expanding gradually rather than rapidly (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2008).

**Proposed definition.** On a systemic and organizational level, *capacity building* refers to increasing both the quality of programs and the scope of services. In the context of professional development, *capacity building* is indistinguishable from effective professional development: Both strive to enhance the knowledge, skills, and confidence of staff, and, in turn, the positive impact on programs and participants.

## **Mentoring, Coaching**

**Definitions from related fields.** The terms *mentoring* and *coaching* are frequently used interchangeably in the education community. Both describe enriching relationships between professionals (NYDLN, 2004). However, a distinction can be made. *Mentoring* can be defined as an ongoing relationship between a supportive and knowledgeable guide and a less experienced learner (Omatsu, 2004). In contrast, *coaching* often occurs between peers, pertains to solving specific problems, and takes place on an as-needed basis (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2008). *Mentoring* is frequently associated with enriching the individual, while *coaching* generally focuses on enhancing a program (Center for Coaching and Mentoring, 2008). Lastly, mentoring relationships often develop and are maintained between individuals from different organizations, while coaching arrangements are usually site-based and site-specific.

**OST context.** Mentoring and coaching share many basic characteristics. According to Minnesota SMART, both involve individual relationships in work or education settings through which one person shares knowledge, skills, assistance, and/or support with another. *Mentoring* and *coaching* can be brief or continuous, address specific issues or general concerns, work in hierarchical or peer relationships, and be equally beneficial to both participants (Minnesota SMART, 2007). One difference is that mentors often follow individuals from position to position, whereas coaches generally concentrate on job-specific issues. An additional distinction is that mentors frequently offer a broad knowledge base, while coaches share expertise on a single or limited number of topics.

**Proposed definition.** In many circumstances, the terms *mentoring* and *coaching* are interchangeable. Both are used to describe professional relationships that enrich



individuals as well as programs. *Mentoring* and *coaching* can be short-term or long-term, address specific issues or general concerns, take place within hierarchical or peer relationships, and involve staff from the same organization or different organizations. Effective *mentoring* and *coaching* typically benefit both participants equally.

## **Peer Networking Meetings, Professional Learning Communities**

**Definitions from related fields.** *Peer networking meetings* and *professional learning communities* are forums in which groups of practitioners assist one another in their professional growth and competence. Prevalent among classroom teachers and administrators, professional learning communities can include individuals from one or more programs or agencies, involve scheduled meetings or informal get-togethers, address specific topics or multiple interests, and involve virtual Internet communication as well as face-to-face relationships (Murphy, 1997). Leiberman (1996) suggests that peer networking and professional learning communities

provide opportunities for teachers to develop and reflect on their work and discuss their ideas, gain expertise not available in their schools, participate in a culture of ongoing inquiry, observe other professionals involved in intensive self-renewal and school change, and expand their understanding of policy and practice.

**OST context.** The After-School Institute (2008) defines its monthly peer networking meetings as “a forum to discuss, evaluate, plan, update, and conduct resource sharing, which serves as the primary catalyst for all other [professional development] activities.” The OSTRC hosts monthly peer networking meetings that provide opportunities for staff to share resources and develop new professional relationships; participants use these experiences to enhance their programs and thus improve student outcomes. Peer networking meetings

(PNMs) can target staff from one organization or many, address direct-service and/or administrative staff, and be voluntary or mandatory. They may provide credits toward state- or city-mandated training. PNMs differ from formal workshops in that they do not use lecture as a primary activity; they do include ample opportunities for staff networking and feature peers, rather than external authorities, as panelists or presenters.

**Proposed definition.** *Peer networking meetings* are venues in which staff are encouraged to meet and get to know one another; share interests, expertise, and resources; and engage in collective problem solving. Unlike traditional workshops or trainings, PNMs use dialogue as the primary activity, include ample time for networking, and feature peers rather than experts as panelists or presenters. PNMs can involve staff from one organization or many. Participants may have comparable or diverse job responsibilities, come from similar or dissimilar programs, and represent specific or broad geographic areas. As with all professional development activities, PNMs strive to enrich staff as a means of enhancing programs and participants.

### **Quality Improvement**

**Definitions from related fields.** In the nonprofit sector, the term *quality improvement* refers to many things: enhancing the customer or client experience, enriching organizational or programmatic infrastructure, cultivating staff growth and competence, and increasing the inherent value of services and resources. All quality improvement efforts require leaders to assess, organize, and encourage improvement, building on a foundation of staff trust. Strategies must begin with administrative and staff support, be broken down into manageable components, and be introduced in a climate in which people willing and able to implement change (Berman, 1998).

**OST context.** *Quality improvement* means maximizing the number of promising practices in an OST program or agency (Rand Corporation, 2005). Promising practices are those that have been tangibly linked to an increased likelihood of student achievement (Peter, 2002). Such practices can be divided into structural features, such as program administration, and process fea-

tures, such as adult-youth relationships (Little, 2007). Quality improvement strategies include professional development activities such as workshops, technical assistance, and coaching. They may also involve other types of interventions, including direct funding, volunteer recruitment, and facility improvements (Granger, 2007). Continuous quality improvement systems help agencies monitor and enhance their own programs over extended periods of time (Weisburd & McLaughlin, 2004).

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### **Technical Assistance**

**Definitions from related fields.** Minnesota SMART (2007) defines *technical assistance* (TA) as a relationship between an expert and a client in which the expert provides the client with customized assistance regarding a specific programmatic issue. TA can help staff define problems, analyze problems, and develop practical and effective responses (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2007). While agencies often combine the terms *training* and *technical assistance* into a single heading or service, trainings are usually more formal and generalized while technical assistance is less structured and more situation-specific.

**OST context.** Technical assistance is broadly defined and often used interchangeably with the terms *consultation* (National Institute on Out-of-School Time, 2008), *customization* (Center for Afterschool Education, 2008), *intensive institution-specific assistance* (The After-School Institute, 2008), *agency mentoring* (Partnership for After School Education, 2008), and *service-on-demand* (National Center for Quality Afterschool at the Southwest Educational Developmental Laboratory, 2008). Fletcher (2004) describes OST technical assistance as “ensuring accountability, guaranteeing compliance with requirements, and supporting programs in specific ways

by answering questions and providing information and advice” (p. 16). In the OST field, TA differs from trainings and workshops in that it frequently takes place at the program site; often involves staff from single rather than multiple organizations; may be less formal and more conversational than a training session; focuses on an issue or issues of specific interest to the staff, program, or agency; may be initiated by the client (insider) or the expert (outsider); and may extend beyond a pre-determined duration.

**Proposed definition.** *Technical assistance* refers to customized help and support that addresses specific issues or needs. External experts may provide TA to individual staff members, multiple staff members, entire programs, or entire organizations. While TA is often implemented on-site with individuals from a single organization, it can also be offered off-site for representatives from multiple programs or agencies. TA can be initiated by recipients, program monitors, administrative personnel, or funding agencies.

### **Workshops, Trainings**

**Definitions from related fields.** The terms *workshops* and *trainings* are often used interchangeably. According to Merriam-Webster (2008), a *workshop* is usually a brief educational program for a small group of people that focuses on techniques and skills in a particular field. Broad and Newstrom (1992) define *trainings* as “instructional experiences provided primarily by employers for employees, designed to develop new skills and knowledge that are expected to be applied immediately upon arrival or return to the job” (p. 5). In general, workshops are expected to yield long-term benefits while trainings address specific situations and skill-sets. Workshops can also be a component of a training strategy, while trainings are rarely embedded in workshops.

**OST context.** Many organizations use the term *training* to describe a broad range of professional development activities. *Workshops* are more likely to present general knowledge—for instance, “Introduction to Youth Development”—while *trainings* generally offer skill development in areas such as CPR, grant-writing, or implementing a specific curriculum. However, most organizations use the two terms to mean essentially the same thing: formal venues in which OST staff learn to work with rich curriculum, forge supportive relationships with youth, and partner with communities to achieve optimal results (The After School Corporation,

2008). Workshops and trainings generally last from one to three hours, are implemented by one or more facilitators, can be held on-site or off-site, can accommodate staff from one or more programs, can be single-session or multi-session, can be offered alone or as part of a larger conference or symposium, and can cover a wide range of content and skills (Partnership for After School Education, 1999).

**Proposed definition.** Generally speaking, *workshop* and *training* are synonymous terms that describe formal sessions in which staff learn content and skills that are immediately useful or broadly applicable. Workshops and trainings can be facilitated by one or more presenters, held on-site or off-site, include staff from one or more programs, be single-session or multi-session, and cover a broad range of topics. The overarching goal of workshops and trainings is to improve program quality through staff development.

### **Toward Consistent Terminology**

As with many evolving fields, the out-of-school-time profession struggles with terminology and consistency. Although many agree that professional development is a critical element of program quality and student impact, few concur on its precise definitions or components. By exploring and defining seven OST professional development terms, I hope to ignite a conversation about professional language, consistent terminology, and productive communication. This conversation can only enrich the field as it continues to design and implement professional development activities, collect information on effective interventions, and convey its resources and findings to other professions.

I have proposed broad and inclusive definitions rather than specific and exclusive ones. Similarly, I have combined terms, such as *workshops* and *trainings*, when the distinctions between the two are inexact, fluid, or debated. I included the terms *capacity building* and *quality improvement* because they are frequently used to describe professional development activities or outcomes. However, since these terms pertain more to programs and systems than to professional development, I would not generally include them in a conversation specifically about professional development.

This article has not covered many additional professional development formats that are less familiar but equally creative and effective. These venues include administrative and frontline observations and apprenticeships, university coursework and degrees, multi-year

career lattices, youth worker certification programs, and OST professional development standards (NYDNL, 2006).

While vastly different in format and delivery, all types of OST professional development should be designed for and culminate in enhancing student outcomes and achievement. Thus, it is misleading to distinguish professional development that influences the individual from that which affects programs or program participants, particularly in this field where staff frequently change positions and move from one organization to another. Regardless of how it is initiated or implemented, quality professional development should enrich the staff person as a means toward enriching the students.

The terms defined in this paper are clearly complex and open to interpretation. In an immediate effort to enhance communication, organizations should use professional development terms consistently in their literature and outreach materials, defining those terms whenever possible. The ultimate goal of this paper is to begin a conversation in which a national collaborative of OST organizations can agree on a common set of professional development definitions.

## Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges the following staff of the Out-of-School Time Resource Center for their contributions to this article: Lisa Colby, MSW, LSW, senior research coordinator; Katie Derickson, communications coordinator; and Deepa Vasudevan, project assistant.

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